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Personal Space:
Explorations of Environment, Surroundings, and Sense of Place

By
Maggie Smith

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, Mississippi
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ABSTRACT

MAGGIE SMITH: Personal Space: Explorations of Environment, Surroundings and Sense of
Place

(Under the Direction of Ann Fisher-Wirth)

This thesis is a mixed collection of prose poetry and creative nonfiction focused on the author's relationship to her surroundings and environment. The poems and essays that make up this thesis are divided into three separate sections based on a shift in environment: childhood in Madison, MS, college in Oxford, MS, and travels outside of the state of Mississippi. While much of this thesis concerns natural environment and landscape in terms of its relationship to the author, the term "environment" also includes relationships with friends, family and lovers, abstract environments of educational institutions like Catholic school and public university, and social and educational pressures that affect the author's mental state. As this thesis includes nonfiction, the author has tried to recreate events, locations and conversations to the best of her ability from her own memories, journal entries and follow-up conversations with family and friends.

INTRODUCTION

In beginning my thesis, my original and most basic goal was to craft a piece of work that melded my English major and my Environmental Studies minor. My intent was to write a nature-writing thesis focused on my surroundings and relationship to the natural world during different periods in my life. However, as friends began to ask me what it was my thesis was about, I adopted the answer, “It’s a creative thesis, focused on environment and sense of place.” This was a much more complex answer than merely “It’s a nature-writing thesis,” as I found that the work I was producing and how the pieces related to each other was much more complicated and layered than I had originally anticipated.

I would still classify my thesis as environmental writing, and the natural world is still a major theme that connects the pieces I have presented here within my thesis. However, during the process of producing material and fitting the work into a larger collection with connecting threads, the term “environment” has taken on a different meaning. Environment is defined as “the natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity.” This is the definition I had in mind in my original conception of my thesis. However, environment is also defined as “the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives and operates,” and this is the definition I now have in mind when I classify my thesis as “environmental writing.”

In the work that makes up this final draft of my thesis, “environment” is many things. In the section “Yellow House,” it is my childhood backyard, my relationships with my parents and extended family, my years in Catholic school, my own solitude. In the section “Swollen Creek,” is my own loneliness, a stretch of open road, a creek bed, my first experiences sexually, the emotional strain of being in an unfamiliar place for college, of

being completely on my own. In the section “Open Road,” it is the unmatched natural beauty of Costa Rica, the cosmic wonder of a solar eclipse, the ocean when it is placid and when it is violent, my growing comfort with my own sexuality and evolving romantic relationships. My environment encompasses natural, rural, urban and suburban landscapes. My environment includes landscapes that are entirely manmade, landscapes that are natural and landscapes that have been manipulated. My environment encompasses landscapes made up of social and emotional pressures, relationships with friends and lovers and family members. What binds these seemingly disparate environments together is their shared role in the shaping of my psyche over the past twenty-one years. The final draft of this thesis is about my personal environment in its many complicated forms, and how they have molded me into the person I have come to be.

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I.

Yellow House

Milo

Milo, the kitten who took up residence in the storm drains of our quiet suburb, slinked through the fence posts after the grayed wood slats began to rot. His kingdom began and ended, in the one ripe corner of our yard where our dogwood tree and my brother's construction daydreams took root. My sister and I would lay down, summer rain-wet grass and long matted hair brushing on our backs, Milo on our chests. His mewling mingled with the sound of wind rushing through the ankle-high grass our father always said he would cut. When our father fixed the loose board to appease our mother, who feared scratches and sickness and sneezing, we heard Milo pawing, whining, trying to get in again. I could picture the soft wood peeling away, clinging to his young claws. The pawing eventually ceased, and with it went the mewling and crisp afternoons spent in patchy sunlight. Sometimes I think I hear him at my door at night, pleading. In the dream, I can never get the door open before his crying stops.

Brown Sugar Rabbit

When my mother spies ragged edges on the leaves of her zinnias and black-eyed Susans, she clicks her tongue. “Rabbits,” she mutters the word under her breath when she thinks I’m not listening. That summer, I sit crossed-legged in the backyard from the time swim practice ends until I cannot stand the mosquitos and it becomes too dark to read my copy of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. I do not catch glimpse of a rabbit until it is time for Eustace and Lucy and Edmund to return to Earth and my mother has asked me if I need pencils for school this year. The sun has hidden itself behind the gray slats of the fence, and I have closed my book when the grass rustles. He is the color of the brown sugar my mother uses when she bakes. I imagine if I touch him, he will crumble just the same. When he takes one step forward and settles into the grass, I reach out my hand. His nose twitches once and then he is gone, bolted back to burrow under the hedges. I lie on my back and let the mosquitoes suck on my outstretched legs and arms. I think maybe if I lay very still, maybe even fall asleep, I will wake up nose to nose with my brown sugar rabbit.

Mrs. Mustain's Crane

When I think back on my thirteen years in Catholic school and what sets it apart from the educational experiences of my peers, there are many things that come to mind. There's the speaker we had in seventh grade that lectured on chastity and made us all sign an abstinence pledge, a little plastic card I carried around in my wallet for longer than I should have. There's the quiet revelation I had only a few years ago that I was taught evolution in my biology classes, while many of my peers in both public and private high schools in Mississippi were not. There were the masses once a month in the auditorium, the school sponsored trip to the March for Life in D.C. each year, the trip I took with my junior year religion teacher and a dozen other girls to visit three different convents in the New Orleans area for an entire weekend. We called it a Nun Run.

The most memorable component of my time in Catholic school, however, is the character of Mrs. Barbara Mustain.

A tiny woman with close-cropped gray hair, never seen not in a button-up with slacks and a pair of diamond studs, Mrs. Mustain was as old-school Catholic as they come. She taught Art History and a variety of religion classes from eighth to twelfth grade. How frequently you had her during your time at St. Joe depended entirely on how your schedule fell, on how lucky (or unlucky) you happened to be.

Mrs. Mustain had a voice like warm maple syrup with a cadence that rolled like a gentle wave through her cozy heated classroom. She kept the heat turned up and liked to keep the lights off so students could better see the PowerPoints that accompanied her lectures. Sometimes she would like candles that smelled like vanilla or cinnamon. So it should come as no surprise students would fall asleep in her classes. She would gently shake

them awake, calling out in her grandmotherly voice, “Now Chris, come back to me, come back to me now!”

Sometimes, her classes would swing to the opposite end of the spectrum. She would rail loudly against sins like fornication, against men “spilling seed,” and answer very specific questions about sex and morality:

“Mrs. Mustain, is fingering technically a sin?”

I can’t recall whether it was or not.

In these classes, she was lively and animated, bouncing wildly from point to point. In a lecture concerning the story of Samson and Delilah, to illustrate the image of Samson’s hair being cut and the loss his strength, she yanked my friend Hannah’s hair. When I sat down to write this essay, I asked my close friends for their own memories of Mrs. Mustain. My friend Sarah, who was in the graduating class below me at St. Joe, recalled Mrs. Mustain’s comparison of the Church to a body and its many functioning parts. In an effort to more effectively drive home this point, she assigned each student a body part. Sarah’s classmate Max was the anus.

The one Mrs. Mustain quirk to top all others, however, was definitely The Crane.

On the campus of St. Joseph Catholic School, there was a small body of water we called Bruin Pond, named for our school mascot. It wasn’t particularly impressive, but pressed against the slightly hilly landscape of St. Joe’s lush green campus it could be quite beautiful, especially on a sunny day.

Mrs. Mustain prayed by the pond every morning, saying at least one decade of the Rosary but more often reciting the Rosary in its entirety. On sunny days, we would take a

break from lectures on religious history and follow Mrs. Mustain on her daily path that looped across the grounds, ending on the banks of Bruin Pond.

The Crane first came up on one of these Rosary walks. An egret, a frequent visitor on the shores of the pond, was perched not far from where our class stood, finishing up contemplation of the Fifth Luminous Mystery. We concluded the Rosary and Mrs. Mustain smiled.

“Ahhhh yes, I was wondering when he’d show up.”

We all turned to glance at the heron, passive and docile as the water lapped at his feet.

“That’s my crane,” Mrs. Mustain said. “God sends him to me every time I pray out here. He’s the Holy Spirit, watching over and encouraging me while I pray.”

A quick note on Catholics: when it comes to symbolism, we tend to take everything quite literally. We believe that the bread and wine we consume at communion becomes the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, a process called transubstantiation. We believe in the Holy Spirit, not merely as a concept of divine inspiration, but as an actual being, separate and yet still one with God the Father and Jesus Christ his son. So when Mrs. Mustain said that The (misidentified) Crane was the Holy Spirit, we good Catholic kids knew she meant it literally. We all glanced at each other, hiding smiles in our hands. Mrs. Mustain was really convinced that this bird was the Holy Spirit, visiting her while she prayed the Rosary.

My close friends and I snickered about it later. Poor, kooky, backwards Mrs. Mustain. She had not only misidentified an egret as a crane, but she really thought it was a bird sent by God to watch over her. What were the chances that The Crane was even the same bird she

claimed to be seeing day after day? Was God divinely-inspiring every egret in central Mississippi, just in case his top guy wasn't available for the job on Tuesday mornings?

As time drew on, Mrs. Mustain became a familiar joke between my friends and I. We all practiced our own impressions of Mrs. Mustain's up and down cadence, but our friend Meredith's was by far the best. She threw her head from side to side in the exact same way Mrs. Mustain did and could match the way her voice jumped from soft to loud perfectly. Meredith would launch into an unexpected imitation of Mrs. Mustain at lunch in the middle of conversation, and the rest of us would fall into laughing fits.

None of us, at least not then, really hated Mrs. Mustain. None of us even hated the Catholic Church. Mrs. Mustain was just an oddity, an eccentric, something we could joke about over lunch after we had done the Sign of the Cross and said the blessing.

I am what people refer to as a "Cradle Catholic." My mother's family was the only collection of Catholics in their small rural community of Vaughan, MS. When my mother married my father, who was raised in a blended household of Methodist and Baptist faith, one of her requirements was that my father would convert and their children would be raised Catholic. Besides one year each in three different religious preschools for my two siblings and I, this stipulation included Catholic education. From kindergarten to senior year of high school, I was immersed in Catholicism as part of my education. Besides taking different incarnations of essentially the same religion course every year, Catholicism and religious rhetoric made its way into other school subjects as well. I recall in fourth grade, at the close of our environmental science unit, our teacher included a bonus question on the test:

"Where did the first banana tree come from?"

I found this question endlessly confusing, so I wrote that the first banana came from seed dispersal via wind or the fur of an animal, even though I knew this couldn't be how the *first* banana tree came to exist.

My best friend Ramsay was called to the front of the room when the tests had been graded the following week to provide us with the answer, as she was the only that had gotten it right.

“Ramsay, where did the first banana tree come from?” my teacher asked.

“From God,” she said.

I was also highly involved in my church's youth group, as were almost all of my close friends, who were also Cradle Catholics. We spent Sunday evenings after mass hanging out and eating pizza in the St. Richard's rec room, playing air hockey and foosball and nonviolent video games before and after a brief lesson from our youth director, Miss Amelia. Every summer, we took week long service trips with Catholic organizations like Catholic Heart Work Camp and Alive in You, where we performed service work like painting houses, clearing brush and doing yard work, or volunteering with local charity groups. We took trips white water rafting on the Ocoee River in Chattanooga, TN and Okatoma River in Seminary, MS. During spring break, we traveled to Colorado to go skiing. From the time I was fifteen up until I graduated high school, I sang at 5:00 masses on Sunday in the St. Richard's youth band, showing up two hours before mass began to rehearse. When I wasn't in school, I could most often be found in St. Richard's Catholic Church.

The first time my friends and I spent time together outside of parental supervision, the first time I travelled without my mother or father, the first group that began to feel like a

family outside of my real family, it all centered around the Catholic Church. There is no way to separate my growing up and gaining independence from my relationship with the church.

I still remember the first time I heard the gossip, perhaps from Meredith. Her mother taught English at our high school, so she knew all the dirt.

“Mrs. Mustain’s the type of Catholic who doesn’t actually believe in divorce.”

“That’s not so strange. I know lots of people like that.”

“No, like he and her husband don’t live together. They haven’t for a long time. But Mrs. Mustain won’t agree to a divorce. Her husband has a whole other family and she still won’t do it.”

For my friends, this was yet another of Mrs. Mustain’s eccentricities. For me, it was shattering. I pictured tiny little Mrs. Mustain, with her slacks and her button-ups and her diamond studs, alone in a big house that used to house a husband who’d left her and children who’d grown up and begun to have children of their own. I wondered if she burned candles in every room, if she kept all the lights down low.

People often ask, and I often ask myself, what it is I think I learned in Catholic school. My response is mixed. I think fondly of my best friend of seventeen years now, whom I met in kindergarten on the first day, who weathered every year with me until our high school graduation, who always held a spot for me in the pizza line at youth group on Sundays. I think of my Health teacher, who said he would be fired if he taught us anything about the mechanics of sex. I think of my junior year religion teacher and her social justice unit, about her lessons on liberation theology and the Desaparecidos of Argentina. I think of

my senior year religion teacher, who showed us a series of lectures on chastity from the 90s where the host said, “What’s wrong with gender roles? Personally, I love gender roles,” and how everyone turned to stare at me.

But mostly I think of Mrs. Mustain and The Crane. I think of her eccentricity and devotion, of her large lonely house.

I do not remember when I stopped going to church. It was sometime during my sophomore year of college, a slow fadeout rather than an abrupt breaking. There is no single moment where I decided, “That’s it. I can’t anymore.” It was a buildup of tongues held during homilies, of the slow realization that I would have to reign myself in if I wanted to remain here. It was the constant of kneeling down in the pew before mass, trying to say Hail Marys or Our Fathers or Glory Bes, when all I could see was myself, alone in an empty house, with a crane outside my window.

The Tomato Plants

The tomatoes mirrored the shape of my six-year old fist – firm in some places, more lumpy in others. Cupped in my palms, I pricked the taught skin with one small thumbnail and lapped up the juice that dribbled out. The vines that twined around the post were skinny and fragile, clingy but limp – much like how I felt in my eight-year old frame. I caressed the dirt, relished the grime taking up residence under my nails. I remember the day when my brother took a shovel to the pot I had painted with my name. I saw the vines strung out like emaciated corpses. I saw the pulp, thick in some places, runny in others, smeared across the brick like the entrails of a rabbit. My mother grew impatient when after two days I was still inconsolable, still carrying around shards of my polka dot Garden Center pot. “Grow another,” she said. And I tried. But it was as though my thumbs had turned black, not from contact with the earth, but from the knowledge that things could die.

Forest

At twelve, I take more comfort in the company of trees than the company of people.

My limbs have stretched like young tree branches, more fragile than supple, too easy to snap.

My hair goes too long without being trimmed like the crepe myrtle in our yard that nearly breaks apart because my father never remembers to prune it. I spend afternoons after school staring up at the canopy of the forest a bike ride away from my house, because now I am old enough for time spent outside the confines of my too-short street. I come home late every day, skin scraped rough from climbing, my feet black from walking barefoot. I dream every night that my trees possess voices like in *Lord of the Rings*. Each hour spent with them I keep quiet, just in case they can speak, and are only waiting for someone patient enough to listen.

The Barn

Dad and I march through the overgrown brush that crowds the path. We are in his hometown of Louisville, MS, headed to the old barn the family now uses for storage. This is apparently the same barn his sister, my Aunt Bridget, once jumped off of with an umbrella. She was trying to fly.

“I want to check on my car while I’m here,” Dad had said. We are visiting his second sister Susan and her husband Jim for the first time in what may be two years. With my grandmother Mumzie in a care facility closer to home, there isn’t much reason to make the trek anymore. I think it also makes my Dad uncomfortable, seeing his sister living in his mother’s house, cooking in her kitchen, sleeping in her bed. He’s quiet on the drive to the barn, just sings along to the radio. Normally, these drive are when I get to learn about Dad – that he was a disc jockey at the Louisville radio station when he was in high school, that he and Bridget and Susan used to picnic in the graveyard next to their house, that his college roommate went to rehab for drugs and passed away a few years ago.

I don’t get any stories. Not on this drive.

“Oh, I sure hope we locked the place up. It looks like kids have been here.”

Crumpled Bud and Miller Light cans litter the pathway to the barn as it comes into view. It is faded and weatherworn, but sturdy looking. Solid. There is a chain with an unlocked padlock wrapped around the door handles. Dad unloops it and slides open the doors.

There are school desks, road signs, tables and chairs. The barn is overflowing with bits and pieces of Dad’s childhood, and at the center of it sits a large mass covered with a

dusty tarp. Dad yanks it off and the dust ripples and shines in the winter sunlight, revealing a little car Dad tells me is an MG-B convertible. It reminds me of an old sepia photograph, like the color has been sucked out of it with a hose.

“One of these days I’m going to get the time to fix this little thing up,” Dad says. One of the doors has been left wide open, revealing the interior, littered with beer cans. He cleans them quietly off the seats. I imagine teenagers rubbing up against each other, like cats in heat, kissing and rolling around in the front seat of this car my dad has held on to for so many years, and I start to tear up. I wander towards one wall of the barn away from Dad. He wipes dust off the windows with his shirttail, runs his hand over the hood. We are both silent for a while, then Dad pulls the tarp back over the little convertible. We leave, wrapping the chain and padlock around the door handles. Dad says he’ll find the key soon.

On the way home, passing slabs of concrete foundation left over from the tornadoes a few years prior, Dad and I talk about music. He likes Brandi Carlile and Joss Stone, Jason Isbell and the Avett Brothers.

“When was the last time you went to a show, Dad?”

He goes quiet for a while. “I don’t remember,” he says.

I recall last year, when after a long period of deliberation alone in my college apartment, I told my Dad I thought I might be depressed. He was kind in his response, but not particularly helpful. He prefaced that, though we have a history of depression and anxiety in our family, I probably just needed to take better care of myself. Was I eating well, he asked? Getting enough sleep? Maybe I should exercise more, and also maybe work on not letting things affect me so deeply.

“Life is mostly monotonous with occasional moments of happiness,” he said.

I think of Dad’s long hours in his office, working as an accountant for the medical center. I think of his late nights watching movies by himself in the living room because he can’t sleep. I try to remember the names of his friends, but I come up empty. He hasn’t spent deliberate time with what I would consider a friend for as far back as I can remember.

I lock myself in Dad’s old room when I get home. I cry into his pillow and listen to him and Susan making empty small talk in the living room.

When I Return to Earth

The first time my mother asks me to weed her garden, I am honored. I have never been allowed near her morning glories or Johnny-jump-ups. I have not run my fingers through earth since I stopped growing tomatoes. I plunge my hands in an ant bed by accident. My hands swell and turn red, huge and knotted with small hard bumps, like my favorite tree in the woods up the street from our house. The second time, it has just rained the night before, and the earth smells thick and new and somehow familiar. Weeding is...precise, deliberate, an act that requires attention. I tell my mother it is monotonous. She pushes back the brim of her sunhat and rolls her eyes. And yet...That summer, my mother finds me in the garden every morning, up before her, going over my work from the day before, yanking harder, digging deeper. I never weeded my tomato plants. There was no need to, with their taking root in Garden Center pots. I wonder if I ever understood then that weeds could choke the life out of plants, could suck the soil dry and turn the flowers black and withered. I wonder why I stopped growing things, why I never put my hands back into the earth. And I wonder if it is because I let myself be choked by weeds I hadn't the heart to tear up by the roots.

Sweet Breath, Hard Work

The cow in front of me has bent down to graze. She lifts her head to aid swallowing and lets out a rush of sweet, warm breath that makes my calves tingle, even through my jeans. She brings her head up just over the fence, and I reach to stroke the auburn hair between her eyes and down her nose. It is thick, soft and curly. It reminds me of the throws my mother keeps on our living room couch back home. I want to press my face to the soft hair and rub my cheek against it, but I recognize that this is probably not the best idea.

The Office of Sustainability at the University of Mississippi has taken us interns on a field trip to Brown Family Dairy in Yocona, MS, about fifteen minutes outside of Oxford proper. I am overwhelmed by the scent of livestock carried in on the crisp October air, as well as the in the gravel driveway with Bubba the basset hound while we wait for the next round of cows to be brought into the milking shed.

When the Browns call us into the shed, we get a rundown of the operation and an inside look at the evening milking. The cows are strapped into pumps that fit snugly over the entirety of the udder, draining each cow of its heavy burden. They are placid, chewing on feed while the machine works and hums. We wander outside and listen to the Browns speak in the pasture set aside for cows about to calf. The country dogs bark and howl and nip at the heels of the gentle giants, who are swollen and waiting to give birth.

We depart after an hour of exploring the dairy and farm, then drive off down the country roads as the sun dips behind the trees and colors the whole landscape. It is one of those famous Oxford rainbow sunsets. They always remind me of a watercolor – the way yellow bleeds into blue and pink and the whole sky seems heavy and saturated.

I come home covered in the sweet scent of hay and warm milk and course cow hair. I

pull my sweatshirt to my nose and inhale until I can no longer gather up the scent. I ponder the farm, the cows and the labor. “I could do that,” I think.

I shake my head, trying my best to dislodge the thought. Perhaps in another life, I could have done that. In fact, I know I could have. Now I am not so sure.

My mother grew up Katherine Lutz on a farm in Vaughan, MS. It is defined as an “unincorporated community” outside of Yazoo City, MS, birthplace of the famed Mississippi writer, Willie Morris. “Unincorporated community” translates roughly to “all the farmland outside of Yazoo City proper.” The nearest neighbor to the Lutz family farm is approximately a quarter mile down the road. The house is muted white, with a full front porch complete with rocking chairs and flowerpots of Johnny Jump Ups too big to wrap your arms around. My favorite part of the house is the bell that stands ten feet high at the beginning at the long brick pathway that leads from the gravel lot to the front door. I have never heard the bell ring. Much of the rope used to ring the bell has been weathered and rotted away, so that now the rope is too short to pull.

My grandmother, Nanaw, still lives on the farm at the spry age of eighty-nine. My unmarried Uncle Tommy, one of Mom’s five brothers, lives with her and tends the farm and the cows they still keep, which number around 150. He patrols the thousand acres in his dusty black pickup truck, fixing the tractor when it breaks, birthing the calves and keeping the cows happy and healthy.

When I was no more than ten, Uncle Tommy took me out into the pasture in his pickup. We drove for maybe ten minutes, then stopped at a little shack.

“C’mon, Maggie. Wanna show you ‘sum.”

He walks me into a shack where a newborn calf, perhaps a day old, is tottering on her spindly new legs. She is a soft, creamy white, with big brown eyes that remind me more of dog than a cow. She sniffs my palm, and her nose is chilled and wet.

“Wanna feed ‘er, Maggie?”

Uncle Tommy has pulled out a foot long bottle with a rubber stopper, filled with milk. The glass is slick and the bottle wide in my small hands, but Uncle Tommy helps me hold it, supporting the bottle at the base. We tilt it forward as the calf suckles and feeds, making soft wet sounds with her mouth. Neither of us speaks while the calf is feeding, and before I know it the moment is over. We drive back to the house in silence until I break the quiet with a simple, “That was really cool, Uncle Tommy.”

It’s just the two of them, Uncle Tommy and Nanaw, and has been since not long after I was born. Granddaddy died of liver cancer when I was a baby. They just keep cows now, but when Mom was growing up they had chickens, pigs, horses, the works. My Uncle Stephen always wanted me to learn how to ride, but he never kept horses once he left home, and Mom didn’t like the idea anyway. She got bucked when she was a kid, I think more than once. I don’t think she liked the horses much, even before they bucked her. She claims it’s because the horses never liked her.

Mom was an accountant when she met my dad. She never went back to work after I was born, staying home to take care of me, followed by my sister, then my brother. She likes antiquing and Lifetime movies, pot roasts and homemade birthday cakes. Her buttercream frosting is to die for. She plans educational road trips to national monuments and only really listens to John Tesh radio. When my sister and I found out she used to show pigs, we laughed. No, not our mother. No way. Not the woman who screamed when Dad held the

neighborhood cat Oscar up to the kitchen window. Not the woman who cringes when we visit friends and their golden retriever circles her ankles. Not our mother.

The growing distance from agricultural tradition is present throughout the United States, but it is palpable in both my mother and me. I am one generation removed from the farm, and I have no idea really what it is my Uncle Tommy and Nanaw do, or what their daily duties entail. I had to ask a few years ago how they made a profit.

“I mean, I know they keep cows, but like...what do they do with them?” To my knowledge, Uncle Tommy and Nanaw were neither butchers nor dairy farmers. What else was there for them to do?

“They just sell to whoever’s buying. Nothing too complicated,” my mother said.

“Oh,” I said. That made a lot of sense. I realized much later I hadn’t even thought to ask if they dealt in beef or dairy cows.

I think often of the family holidays spent on the farm, chilly Thanksgivings and frigid Christmases, and how we often never ventured past the back porch. Uncle Tommy would sometimes take us out to the pasture while he worked, but he preferred taking my brother and my cousin Wilson. I recall one Thanksgiving when Uncle Joe suggested he take all the boys out to the deer stand. I was indignant.

“Why don’t *I* get to go? Why is it just the boys?” I whined. Uncle Joe had no time for my nonsense.

“Maggie, you wanna hunt?” I lowered my head.

“Not really.”

“Well then, whaddya wanna go out to the deer stand for?”

I kept my mouth shut, but I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be taught. I wanted to know what it was my uncles were doing, how they interacted with the land. Maybe I didn't want to shoot a deer, but I wanted to better understand it. I wanted to know *how* to do the things my uncles did, even if I never did them in my own free time.

Sometimes I am mad at my mother, at Nanaw and my uncles, Tommy and Stephen and Joe and Gus and William. Why didn't they think it was important to teach me these things? Why don't I know how to mend a fence, or how to shoot, or the best way to raise chickens or even how to ride a horse? How did so much knowledge, essential to so much of human survival for hundreds of years, get lost somewhere between my mother and me?

Most of the time though, I am just upset with myself for not asking more questions, for not seeking out the knowledge that was sitting right in front of me. Why didn't I ask Uncle Tommy more questions when we drove through the pastures in his pickup, loading up hay? Why didn't I even think to ask what it was we were doing? But then again, why would you show a child how hard your work is, how much your body aches, when they will never have to subject themselves to it? I think of Uncle Tommy, of how most of my memories of him as a child are of him passed out in the backroom with old westerns playing on the T.V. He was always exhausted, and I never had the insight to guess why. I never needed to know why.

And why should I? Why move forward, away from the farm, only to bring your posterity back to it? It is something I think about every day, the line between progress and forgetting.

Nowadays, I find myself more and more drifting off into daydreams about houses

with wide porches, with acres taken up by livestock or crops, with empty space surrounding me, and skies that fill up with stars. I wonder if I would feel this way had the farm been more present in my everyday life, and less so a hazy vacation daydream where cows soaked me with their warm sweet breath and the skies were painted in watercolors. I am frustrated by my picturesque portraits of farm and country life, of their two-dimensional nature, of their excessively serene atmosphere. I have vague, half-formed ideas of the physical labor, the monotony and turmoil that make up farm living. What little knowledge I do have – of the heavy lifting, of the early mornings, of the harsh realities of death, of the risks of serious injury – I know are beyond my capacity to handle. I have three blisters on my left hand, one on each of my index, middle and ring fingers from holding down guitar strings. The rest of my hands are soft, the skin undisturbed by hard work.

I find myself reading nature poetry more and more lately. Rose McLarney is a newfound favorite, both a personal inspiration and a reminder of my own shortcomings. A native of Southern Appalachia, McLarney's poetry serves as a reminder to me of the harsh realities of farm life. Her poetry is physical and painful, while still retaining a harsh element of beauty. In "Facing North," the opening poem of her collection *It's Day Being Gone*, McLarney outlines the difficulty of her farm life through the shooting of a sick goat. She ponders other experiences of death on the farm, like the gruesome demise of a calf frozen to the ground, complete with McLarney pulling free intestines "too cold to bleed." And yet, McLarney continues to choose the life of a farmer, in all in its grotesque beauty. I read this poem over and over as a reminder of what I too often leave out in my homesteading daydreams. So far, it has reminded me of weaknesses, both physical and mental, but it has

yet to dampen my enthusiasm.

As Nanaw gets closer to her nineties each day, whispered words like “will” and “property” start to pop up more frequently. I catch my mother talking about it one afternoon on the phone with her best friend from college. When she wants a private conversation, Mom takes the phone into the bathroom with her. It’s counterintuitive, because now I know exactly when to listen in. I linger just outside the doorway to the master bath in her and dad’s bedroom. I hang back, making sure she can’t see me in the mirrors that wrap around the room.

“I’m telling you, Gus keeps trying to get in good with Mama. He keeps calling her, asking how she is and if she’s taking care of herself. I’m the one who takes her places. I’m the only one who come to see her and makes sure she gets out of the house.”

I don’t think my mother is vying for a bigger cut in whatever will gets drawn up. I think she’s hurt that Uncle Gus is already seeing dollar signs and that he would try to undermine his siblings. Mom isn’t lying about trying to take care of her mother. That’s where her priorities lie. She takes Nanaw to her doctor’s appointments and shopping in downtown Yazoo City. She knows what Nanaw can and can’t eat because of how sensitive her stomach has become in recent years. Last summer, it was Mom’s idea to bring Nanaw with us to Rosemary Beach, FL on our joint family vacation with the cousins, so Nanaw could see the great-grandkids.

Uncle Gus and his family weren’t present.

The rumor isn’t just that Uncle Gus is vying for a bigger cut in the will – the greater

drama is that he's pulling for his son Wilson to get the family farm. I accidentally open the can of worms one night at dinner, just my parents and I.

"What's Wilson studying at State again, Mom?"

Mom swallows her pot roast, sighs and puts down her knife. "Well," she begins.

I remember Wilson saying he wanted to study pharmacy, but Mom says he's studying agriculture.

"Why'd he change his mind, I wonder?"

Mom looks at my dad, who isn't really paying attention, then back at me.

"Well Maggie, we don't think he did. We think Gus changed it for him."

Uncle Gus has never been my favorite relative. He is always the loudest at family get-togethers, and while no one in my family is particularly politically correct, Uncle Gus is the family member who most frequently speaks in racial slurs.

But Wilson and I have always been close. My mother's photo albums are filled with pictures of us arm in arm, wrapped up in side hugs at the 4th of July and Christmas and Easter and Thanksgiving. There are more than a few snapshots of me kissing him chastely on the cheek. I used to ask his advice about boys when we were both in middle school. He was never very helpful, but he always tried his best. Before he'd made his final decision for college, I asked him how he felt about Ole Miss. The Lutzes were a Mississippi State clan, but I didn't think it mattered so much anymore.

"Yeah, I like it," he said. "Not gonna fly with Dad, though. I don't think he'll pay for school if I don't go to State."

We both laughed, but I caught the seriousness that undercut Wilson's tone. Uncle Gus had said the same thing about fraternities (Wilson would be an SAE or nothing at all), and

now I imagined he had adopted a similar attitude toward Wilson's degree. I'm not even sure how much Wilson knows about farming. I know Uncle Tommy takes him out on his runs through the pasture, and that he's fixed fences and worked with the cows. I know Wilson is a hard worker, which I suppose is one of the things that really matter.

Still.

I wonder if he could handle it. I wonder if any of us, after so long away, could really handle it. Maybe Nanaw will tell Tommy to sell the farm. Maybe Tommy will sell it with or without Nanaw's permission. Maybe he'll keep it going until the cows just aren't drawing a profit anymore, or until he gets too old, or until he dies. Whatever way it goes, in my head, the ending is always the same – the house sits abandoned, dilapidated. The pastures are overgrown and the cows have long been sold off. The farm melts into the landscape, and eventually no one is alive to remember it. The question isn't if. It's when.

My favorite memories from the farm come from sitting on the gray weathered back porch, waiting for the country cats to come out of hiding and rub up against my legs. Nanaw's house is up on cinder blocks, with plenty of space up under the house to crawl and hide. She doesn't even know where the cats came from – generation after generation has just taken up residence underneath her house. Every Thanksgiving and Christmas I would take cold leftover turkey, hold it in my hand and sit patiently on the back porch until I saw gray and orange heads pop out from the depths of the house. I always ate my holiday dinners quickly, allowing for long, uninterrupted hours with my farm cats. I named them all and could recognize them as they grew year by year. My aunts and uncles would laugh.

“Kate, your little veterinarian's out on the back porch again.”

Mom never liked how close I got to the cats because of the risks of scratches and bites or rabies or worse, but the family loved it. The entirety of the Lutz clan was already recruiting me to Mississippi State at the ripe 'ole age of eight years old.

“If you wanna be a veterinarian, Maggie, that’s the place to go.”

I took the praise to heart.

I haven’t been to the farm in maybe three years, but the last time I was there I sat and waited like I always do.

Not one cat came out to greet me.

II.
Swollen Creek

Grease on the Seats

The first time I remember driving farther than the half mile from my front door to my high school, my friend Elisabeth and I went to the new Sonic in Gluckstadt, MS. I had an order of mozzarella sticks. Elisabeth had some variation of a Sonic Blast. I stretched cheese between my teeth with my feet up on the dash while Elisabeth filled me in on the state of things with her new boyfriend, Zach.

“So are y’all like, together?”

“Kinda yeah, I guess. I dunno. I just like him, ya know?”

I didn’t know, but I pretended to. It fit with the aura of independence I was basking in – driving with a friend, paying for food at a drive-thru with cash my parents had allotted me, gossiping about boys.

Elisabeth and I talked for an hour or more before I finally drove her home. After dropping her off, I waltzed into my house, triumphant. Not even my parents’ rapid-fire questions of “How was the drive? How fast did you go? Did you full-stop at stop signs?” could dampen my mood. I had driven myself, bought myself food. I was a proper teenager. It was glorious.

I am unsure what I find so soothing about a Sonic Drive-In. Is it the cheery carhops on roller skates? The freedom to park and idly put my feet up on the dash or hug my knees to my chest, listening to a podcast while I wait for my food? A first taste of freedom, the leftover feeling of independence that permeates each drive-in visit? Whatever it may be, I have found Sonic to be a constant comfort these past several years.

My order has changed very little as time has passed. I rarely go to Sonic with the intention of eating a full meal. In fact, I rarely go to Sonic when I am actually hungry. For me, it is a reprieve, an excuse to drive and get out of the house, an opportunity to either spend time in conversation with a friend or in quiet conversation with myself. I either order mozzarella sticks or a Reese's Sonic Blast. If I am feeling peckish, I order both. I chase the meal with a medium water or a Coca-Cola, or both. If I am actually hungry, I order a kid's grilled cheese, occasionally a pretzel dog.

I cannot recall a time that I have eaten Sonic anywhere other than in my car. Sonic is not food to be taken home and eaten at your kitchen counter or dining room table. It is food meant to leave crumbs on the seats, eaten with your feet either propped up while the car idles or driving down the interstate. The few times I have entered my home with a Sonic bag in hand my appetite has disappeared immediately. I cannot explain why.

My freshman year I would cruise the streets of Oxford, Mississippi late in the evenings with no particular purpose, wading through seas of drunk underclassman as I drove around the Square. I would jump at every message sent in my sorority's pledge class GroupMe – "Anyone sober and can drive?"

Why not? I was already out. Perhaps this was a way for me to meet people, to get them to like me, to make friends. It was proving harder than I thought to make friends in college. I wasn't sure what to talk about or how to begin a conversation. Perhaps by offering a service, I could open up the door to friendship.

I would begin almost every outing at the Sonic on University Avenue, burning my mouth on the hot grease from mozzarella sticks as I drove girls from their dorm rooms in

Crosby Hall to the Levee to Martin Hall to Rooster's to Stewart Hall to The Corner to the frat houses. These chauffeur trips offered brief interludes of chatter in what were otherwise very solitary evenings. I would play the full discographies of the Head and the Heart and the Avett Brothers as I drove aimlessly in circles, trying to wear out my brain so I could force myself to go to sleep.

One night in the dead of winter on one of my late night roams, I stumbled across the grave of William Faulkner for the first time. I had found it completely by accident, when only a week prior I had given myself a stress headache trying to follow directions on my GPS and being lead continuously down dead end roads. The next time I came back, I sat cross-legged on Faulkner's grave in the cool night air, munching on mozzarella sticks.

In the summer after my sophomore year of college, I was home for a brief period, finishing dinner with my parents. I had been dating my first ever boyfriend for two months and was leaving for Gulf Shores in a few days with some new friends and had driven off the road that January in a haze of emotional turmoil that I had told my parents was merely a deer on the highway. I was at the close of a year filled with lonely late night drives and greasy comfort food, and I was feeling contemplative. As I washed my plate, I brought up that first time I had driven by myself so many years ago.

"Oh yeah, and Dad followed you," my mother said.

I stared. "He did what now."

My mother blinked innocently. My father sat, looking off to his left and not at me.

"We never told you? Dad was tracking your location on his phone. The Sonic must've been new or something, because Find My iPhone said you'd driven off the road. We

thought you'd driven yourself into a ditch. So he followed you to Sonic and then left right before you did."

I stared at my parents for a second. A minute. And somehow I couldn't help myself. I started to laugh. It seems somehow fitting that on that first outing, that first time I felt I might be free, my father was not far behind. It seems reminiscent of that comforting red and yellow neon that seems to never be too far away no matter where I am, waiting for me to slide into park, press that bright red button, and greet me with a cheery, "Hello, welcome to Sonic. May I take your order?"

Snake Pit

“Soak your hair, lean back,” he says. “That’s the best part.” *Leave it alone, honey*, I whisper as he leans in to kiss me. My mouth is hot and sticky with beer, with orange juice, with sweat. Water is buffeting, pounding, roaring like my blood, hot in my ears. I can feel my sunburn spreading, creeping across my skin, following after his fingertips. The creek water is so low my head scrapes hard against the jagged bed, but I knock it all the way back. I take the water into my eyes mouth, nose, lungs, brain. I come up sputtering and coughing, his hands on my shoulders, his heavy brown eyes alert and concerned, but drooped. My loyal Labrador. This is the day he says “I love you” by accident when we slide into each other on the slick rocks, slithering over one other like the snakes he’s seen here a handful of times.

Two Dogs, Running

There are two dogs in the field, running. Wet beer sloshes like amber rain out of my silver can as I give chase. There are two dogs in the field, running. We weave in and out of trellised tomato plants, of trees mummified by kudzu, of grasses thigh-high, and rough like sandpaper. There are two dogs in the field, running. He carries me like a bride up the hill and sucks on my earlobe like a thirsty mosquito, unable to be satiated in the sticky summer air. There are two dogs in the field, running. We lose them after ten minutes. They run barking at the close of day while we climb each other like trees.

Empty Stretch

“How fast would you say you were going, sweetheart?”

“I dunno, maybe like, eighty?”

The cop puts his notepad in his lap, stares up at me over his thick-lensed glasses. He has a thin rim of hair around the sides of his head, but the top is bald. He probably has grandchildren.

“Eighty?”

“Yeah, eighty?” My voice cracks.

“Honey, the speed limit here on this stretch of road is fifty. Let’s not say eighty. Let’s say sixty-five.”

“Okay.”

“And you said there was a deer?”

“Yes.” This I can handle. “It just came out of nowhere and I just reacted and I swerved and I ended up in this ditch.”

“Uh huh.” He is looking right at me as he responds. His gaze says, “Oh this poor, stupid girl.” He doesn’t dispute me though.

The grandfatherly cop continues taking my statement. I hug my legs to my chest and cry into the tops of my kneecaps, overwhelmed, shaking. Grandfather Cop attempts to soothe me. “It’s okay honey. Let it out. These things happen. You’re not hurt.”

My car is smashed up in the front, the airbag deployed from the steering wheel, plastic dragging against the ground on the underside of the car. But it is drivable. Grandfather Cop and his middle-aged partner say they will follow me back to Oxford from Pontotoc to

make sure I make it home okay. We stop twice to rip sheets of plastic from the underside of the car that drag as I drive.

My hands quiver and twitch at the steering wheel, my chest heaves as I drive five to ten miles under the speed limit, which I now know is a conservative sixty-five. About fifteen minutes after the second stop to rip up plastic, I begin to sob. A scream is mixed into my heavy weeping. It is the first time I have screamed in recent memory, the first time I have let loose uninhibited, unafraid that someone might hear me.

* * *

My freshman year of college, I spent most of my disposable income on gas. With a roommate who hardly ever left the confines of our small dorm room, I learned early on that what little time I could have to myself was alone in my car. Late in the evenings and into the early hours of the morning, I would drive aimlessly around my small college town of Oxford, MS, limiting myself first to the long, crowded stretch of Jackson Avenue, then to few roads I knew leading to and from The Square. I eventually moved to the quiet neighborhood streets leading away from The Square, crisscrossing and overlapping, thin veins pumping traffic away from the beating heart of my small college town. I discovered the grave of renowned Oxford writer William Faulkner this way, stumbling upon it completely by accident during one of my late night excursions. I ate mozzarella sticks from Sonic on his grave.

My favorite drives quickly became the ones I took down long stretches of empty highway and interstate, down back roads that were poorly lit and leading away from civilization and the lights of town. I found I could be most alone, most contemplative, when I was surrounded on either side by dark, heavy trees. I would pick up my speed, imagining myself as a bird, dipping and darting through the leaves and branches. These lengths of road

mirrored how I pictured my thoughts: empty, stretching out into the blackness with what seemed to be no end in sight.

These night drives were my opportunity to be alone with my thoughts, which were heavy and weighted that year. Making friends in college was harder than I had anticipated. I never seemed to say the right thing or join the right groups. My high school best friend who had gone to a university six hours away was dating her first serious boyfriend and had told all of our friend group but me. My sister was suffering from anxiety and depression but couldn't tell our parents or even me except in pointed hints we apparently couldn't grasp. I pieced together her state of mind by scrolling through her Tumblr posts. As the year wore on and my thoughts began to spiral, these night drives also became a way to wear out and exhaust my brain. When I couldn't sleep or found myself caught in an anxious thought spiral I couldn't force my way out of, I would grab my keys, get in my car and drive until the steady hum of my tires on the road and the quiet rush of trees would lull my brain into relaxation. This quickly became one of the only ways I could get to sleep.

When I drove, I frequently found myself speaking out loud, conversing with myself until I began to cry, particularly when my loneliness felt most inescapable. Driving while emotionally compromised became the norm for me. I would crank my stereo as loud as it could go, yelling the lyrics to loud punk songs as I drove too fast down empty, poorly lit roads.

* * *

My sophomore year of college, things seemed to have gotten only worse. My roommate demanded absolute silence in our home and despised the kittens my other

roommate and I were fostering. She spread rumors about me to our mutual acquaintances, saying how impossible it was to live with me. I was staying out late and going home with boys I'd only just met at parties, having terrible, empty sex in sad college apartments. When I wasn't out I could barely get myself out of bed in the morning. I had difficulty forcing myself to shower, fix my hair or do my laundry.

One night, I lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling with a kitten on my chest. My friendly roommate was out studying, and my unfriendly roommate was leaving for a get-together with mutual friends that I hadn't been invited to. All of the people I had formed tenuous friendships with were at a party, and had been for the last hour. None of them had asked where I was.

I could feel myself beginning to spiral. Staring at the ceiling, I had the thought, "If I don't get up now, I am going to lay here, unmoving, for the next three hours." So I picked up my keys, locked the apartment door behind me, and went for a drive. It was approximately 8:30.

I drove to Tupelo, wanting to try out a new long distance drive, blaring loud punk music and singing along loudly as I tapped the steering wheel. I made a quick lap through Tupelo's small downtown, then circled back, headed home to Oxford.

I had turned my music up as loud as it could go. I was in Pontotoc, halfway home to Oxford. I was unfamiliar with the exits, distracting and crying and talking to myself as the music echoed loudly through the car. As I told Grandfather Cop afterwards, I was going approximately eighty miles per hour.

I saw a sign coming up fast that read "Oxford." I had no idea how sharp the curve was. I had no idea it was essentially a circle. I jerked the wheel and barely pressed the brake,

and my loyal little car jerked wildly out of control. I felt the ground scrape underneath me and bottom of the car bounce against the soft earth. I didn't realize the air bag in my steering wheel had deployed until I found myself waving away some sort of smoke and felt an ache in the center of my chest.

I got out to assess the damage. I waved off Good Samaritans who had seen me spiral out of control and one older man who made me uncomfortable with his insistence on staying until the cops arrived and driving me home to Oxford. I hopped back into my driver's seat. I screamed and sobbed and fretted over what my father would say, how angry he would be with me. I thought about how angry I was with myself. Then I called 911.

* * *

It was months, of course, before I was able to take a solitary drive at night again. At first, I was immobile with my car in the shop. But even after I got it back, I was too scared to take the contemplative drives that had once helped to calm me. I know some crash victims fear the car when they begin to drive again. I was afraid of myself, of how powerful my mind could be, as powerful as my champion of a car (which I still own) could be when it spiraled out of control along an empty stretch of road.

It has only been in the past year that I've told people about this incident in its entirety. In recent telling of the incident, I have admitted there was no deer. I have admitted it was my mind that ran me off the road, not some outside force like a deer.

Of course, my parents still do not know. I doubt that I will ever tell them. I'm out of the woods as they say, in more ways than one. I see no need to worry them about a time in my life that has long since passed.

I still think that environment, that empty stretch of road surrounded on both sides by trees, mirrors the inside of my own head. However, I am no longer convinced of its placidness. I respect both more now, I think, because of what I know is hiding somewhere underneath the surface.

The Lavender Branch

On a Thursday in the dead of winter, a cold January afternoon, I pulled a sprig of lavender from between my ribs. The needle buzzed and scratched and pulled and my blood ran raw red and tender purple as the flower sprouted from my skin. My skin sloughed off in heavy flakes as the bloom grew vibrant and soft, my skin forever textured by this little lavender branch. Something pretty, something womanly, something for growth, something just for me. Some small piece of outside held forever just between my ribs. Some reminder that even when the cold chokes and clings to my throat, when the rest of me withers and is close to death, some small part of me is still alive. Some small part of me is still green.

Porch Light

At summer's close, I sleep in the hammock outside of my house because my roommate has locked me out...again. I shake like the early leaves that float down from the trees beside the back patio. Evening dew soaks me into morning damp, when the sky melts from black to navy to gray. My sleep is fitful and comes in spurts, every hour an agony all its own. The flush of pink

creeps across the breaking sunrise like first love as I shift from hammock to stoop. I hear birdsong – or perhaps birdscreech – as I shake off the last remnants of sleep. As the sky melts into yellow orange, it sparks a flame. I finish Larry Brown's memoir *On Fire* as the flames lick and creep up from behind the fence and into the dome of morning. My roommate lets me in at 9 a.m. *Crashed at a friend's*, I say. Seven precious hours of shivering solitude and a fireman's sky. I keep them for myself.

III.

Open Road

The Thread

“He wants to know if you’d like to go outside and play fútbol with him.”

Miguel is a little boy of eight from the Monteverde region of Costa Rica, and he is staring wide-eyed at the only other boy in his kitchen, a *gringo* from Mississippi named Michael.

“Of course, I’d love to!” As storm clouds suck the afternoon sunlight out of the kitchen, we file out into the open front yard to watch the match, licking hot pineapple and papaya juice from our fingers.

Miguel is unstoppable, tripping up Michael and Abby, making steals and quick passes and taunting in bits of English. The air is weighted down by the coming of the rain, but Miguel is slicing through it like a sharpened machete.

“Guys, look!”

The hot, heavy air has cooled with the arrival of the mist, and with it has come a brilliant rainbow, blended in as part of the dusty, rose sky.

Time stops in this moment. Every spray of mist becomes magnified, every drop visible and shimmering. Abby’s face is frozen in a laugh, the mist glistening in her corkscrew hair. Michael has his tongue out in concentration, trying to block Miguel as he slyly prepares to weave between his legs. Kendall is looking up in awe, with Miguel’s dog Toby snuggling into her lap. Cathy and Ann sit inside the house, chatting with Miguel’s mother in rapid-fire Spanish. Someone has just made a joke because they are grinning wide and open-mouthed. Dr. Fisher-Wirth is wandering the yard with her hood up, snapping photographs of us all so we are never able to forget an instant. Mary is on the porch looking out at it all, her eyes weaving back and forth, taking in the scene.

We have all become connected in this moment, one under the rose and rainbow sky of Monteverde. I shiver, from the sudden icy touch of the mist and the slender thread I feel that is woven through our chests.

And then the moment is gone.

I once again hear dogs barking, Miguel and Michael shouting, peals of laughter and the even flow of Spanish conversation, filled with only a handful of words I am capable of grasping.

I pull at my chest, and for a moment I don't know why. Then I remember I am feeling for the thread. I can no longer touch it. Time has picked up again, the thread has hidden itself from view. I do not know when I will see it again. I convince myself I may never see it again.

But as we leave Miguel's house and trek up the hill towards our temporary home, as the clouds part and shift over the mountains of Monteverde, I think I glimpse something in the group far ahead. The sun has positioned itself between Michael and Ann, making them silhouettes and casting the rest of the group into shadow. The sky is orange and red like fresh tropical fruit and somewhere far ahead, I hear laughing. And for an instant, for less than a breath, time stops.

Fire & Stone

My skin burns pink like the rocks that have caught fire here, in this landscape that swallows me. Stones teeter in towers on top of each other, others scatter like birdseed thrown to the wind. The sky is neon blue, so Day-Glo bright I cannot look up. The sun peels back my skin like the tender peel of a tangerine, and I am opened up. What is inside me, under all these layers? Where does the fresh skin end, where do I hit bone, stone? Am I empty, dry like the creek bed we pass on our trek through Moab, or full of something more like fire? I know this landscape burns in me, that it reaches inside and twists through my intestines. I read Mary Oliver's "The Fourth Sign of the Zodiac" on our drive through the mountains, repeating her lines like familiar prayers. I want to belong to this world, and I want to get started immediately.

Sea Salt

Lauren and I pull into Gulf Shores sometime past ten. We've driven four and a half hours, from Madison, MS to the coast of Alabama for a music festival. The roots of my hair are thick with grease and the grime on my skin seems to slip and slide in a film of sweat. It has been a long ride.

Blake is standing in the parking lot when we arrive. I've offered him a place to crash for the night, since his hotel reservation isn't available until tomorrow afternoon. We've only been friends for perhaps two months, but I like the guy. He is quiet, but with a wit and humor as sharp as saw grass. We can talk about music and books with enough overlap that common ground is always within reach, but also with enough diversity that neither of us gets bored.

"So, it's a hair salon?" he says.

I crack an embarrassed grin. My cousin Rachel sold her house in Fairhope a month ago, leaving us without a place to stay. She felt guilty, so she asked her hairdresser if we could use her salon for the weekend. It's within walking distance of the festival and has free parking, so we could have gotten a worse set up. Blake asked to stay with us for a night only last week, and I suppose I neglected to mention it. He nods as I explain.

"Well, let's check it out," he says.

I find the key the hairdresser has left in a potted plant, unlock the door and begin to inspect the place. It's a one-room salon with a massive futon and room for Blake's air mattress, with all the typical salon amenities: sinks for washing hair, massive mirrors that cover most of the walls, plastic bins stuffed with combs and nail polish, no shower.

Oh right. I'd forgotten. Rachel had said there wouldn't be a shower. I take it in stride, as does everyone else. No one showers at Bonnaroo, right? And besides, our friends have a hotel if we get particularly desperate.

I don't know who it is that suggests we wander down to the beach, but before I know it we are walking the mile and a half to the strip of beach that hasn't been blocked off for the festival. Blake pays a nice couple to go through the Wendy's drive-thru for him – they don't allow walk-throughs, which he takes personal offense to. Lauren and I steal French fries out of the paper bag and run backwards and laugh and joke as we meander up the street. The night is heavy with promise and the weight of the coming rain.

We reach the beach after about ten minutes. Lauren and I break into childish glee, delirious from the long drive. We run shrieking and squealing down the beach, kicking up sand that clings to our calves. We lie on our backs and stare up at the heavy gray clouds, amorphous and weighted with the rain we know will probably break sometime tonight. I try to remember how my cousins hunt for crabs, but the process eludes me. Do you just dig until you find something, or is there a specific technique you're supposed to use that I'm forgetting?

Blake and I are sitting down with our feet on the edge of the ocean, weight resting back on our palms, when Lauren shouts, "I'm going in the water!" She wades deeper, soaking her shorts and the tail of her t-shirt. I follow, as does Blake. We wade and laugh, splashing and grabbing each other by the shoulders.

I'm the one who has the idea.

"I've never been skinny dipping."

The idea hangs in the air for a moment, and I wonder if I've perhaps made a terrible mistake, if I've let the electricity and excitement in the air go to my brain. But then Lauren cracks her signature grin, the one that means she's up to something.

"Well, what the hell. Let's do it."

We turn to Blake, who shrugs.

"Who am I to say no?" he says.

Even with the idea out in the open, we are all still shy. We strip under the water, then run far enough up the beach that our soaked clothes won't be pulled out by the tide. We wade out deep enough that most of our bodies are submerged. My arms are across my chest. I am exposed. We all duck eyes, but occasionally someone will make eye contact. I catch Blake looking at me twice, and I know my skin is flushed hot and pink under the water.

The surf is rough rather than placid, but somehow it calms me. It beats regularly against my exposed skin, grazing against it like a strong pair of hands. The sea massages me into relaxation. I drop my arms. The chill that ripples across my skin is a combination of the cold ocean water and the excitement that comes from feeling wild and exposed.

It's when the storm begins that we all become bewitched.

Lightning streaks far off in the night and everyone's skin is lit up, translucent and tinted blue. Every drop of water that clings to our skin is illuminated and for a split second we are bioluminescent. We are massive jellyfish in various shades of apricot and peach. I shriek with glee, as though the electricity in the air has coursed through my vocal chords, and Lauren follows my lead. We splash and stomp through the black ocean water. When the lightning ricochets through the clouds every few minutes or so, I swear I glimpse my reflection on the ocean's surface. It is a warped, black glass mirror.

I feel Blake's eyes on me, but they no longer feel intrusive. I am uninhibited, reckless and wild, naked in the wet, stormy moonlight of the Alabama coast.

The whole affair lasts maybe five minutes. The magic wears off quickly, overshadowed by the fear of electrocution and the threat of a downpour. We rush to the beach and pull on our soaked clothes. Our walk back to the salon begins at a strolling pace, but a quarter of the way there, the sky lets loose on us. We run back to the salon in the midst of a full-blown monsoon. Water rushes through the street like it's a riverbed, and we are swimming through the sideways rain as we kick off our shoes and run. I shriek, my clothes heavy with the weight of the rain and my skin electrified by the chill. I cannot see five feet in front of me. It is thrilling.

We soak the linoleum floor when we get home, turning the whole salon into an elaborate slip and slide. We take turns toweling off and changing clothes in the small, one-stall bathroom. Lauren is last and opts for a "whore's bath" in the sink, rinsing her hair and sponging herself clean with a washcloth. Blake and I soak up the mess on the floor with the remaining towels.

My hair is matted to my head, tangled by the surf.

"Shit, I forgot a comb." I shout to Lauren in the bathroom, "Hey Lauren, can you braid hair?"

"Nah, sorry girl!"

"I can," Blake says.

I stare at him. He shrugs. I shrug.

He sits in one of the salon chairs and I talk my place at his feet. He works through the tangles with his fingers, twisting them out of their knots and loops. The way his fingers graze against my scalp reminds me of floating on my back on the ocean's surface. The surf pulls on my hair like he does, with a gentle tug, massaging it at the roots. His hands run through my hair like ocean water, smooth and gentle.

He wants to sleep with you.

The thought hits me like an electric shock and my body physically spasms. He stops braiding.

"Did I hurt you? Did I pull too hard? I can stop if you want me to."

I am silent for a moment. Then I whisper, "No, go on."

In my memory, he braids my hair for years. In reality, it is over in less than five minutes. Lauren returns from the bathroom and we chat until our eyelids start to droop. In a fit of friendliness – and possibly mischief – Lauren invites Blake to share the bed with us.

"There's plenty of room," she says. He accepts the offer and climbs in. I sleep in between the two of them, restless and fitful, but somehow electric too. The whole night, Blake's hand is close enough to my thigh that I feel the brush of the pads of his fingertips.

I never move it.

Bottle Necking

I'm going to die from love.

- *Barry Hannah*

I chase his sandy kiss with shots of tequila from the bottle we picked up drunk at a gas station in New Orleans. The beach clings like a child to his beard to my sweat-slicked thighs to my white dress. To meet the ocean ankle – knee – chest – waist – deep is to come home. The sand and algae ripple and whip across the bottom around my feet and ankles like thick, rough hair. His arms are the oceans wrapped around me as the day fades from white to gold. We are swimming in tequila and everything is sweet and warm, everything chased with the scrape of salt, hard and biting against the cracked skin of my lips.

Cyclical

“Maggie, we should stop here or we’ll miss it.”

I plop down immediately, smack in the middle of someone’s front lawn. The grass clings to my sweaty legs, the tequila clings to my throat. We had two margaritas each at the hip taco restaurant Alex said was right out of a *Portlandia* sketch, and I had to down a quarter of mine in two gulps. Everything is warm and sticky – my skin, my chest my brain. I feel Alex’s arm circle around me. I lean into him.

I slip the glasses on and off, alternating between watching the black wafer of the moon begin to overlap the sun and watching the street around me shift in time. It is an accelerated sunset, shadows pulling and stretching across the pavement and slowly filling in the light with dark. We are swimming through time, light rippling and shimmering as though it is pouring in through water.

Totality comes on fast. As afternoon barrels toward evening and into night, the streetlights click on one by one. Birds go quiet, and the low drone of the cicadas crescendos to a heavy scream. It is night is liquid and strange at 1:30 in the afternoon. Every moment of my own life, every moment of every life that has ever existed, seems to be melting and mixing in this brief moment where I finally grasp that time is overlapping, constant.

I am reminded of a concept from my favorite science fiction television show: time is not a straight line. Time is layered, with every moment of history, every insignificant and major event, happening at once. I am beginning to understand that time is cyclical, that periods of your life are not separate entities, but rather overlapping events.

Time is a flat circle.

It makes sense to me that would realize this as the flat disc of the moon slides across the sun, the two cosmic bodies most important to Earth overlapping, present in the same space.

I am in the city that houses the boy I used to love. I am here with the boy I am growing to love, who began his college career in this town, four years before we met by happenstance in a little coffeehouse in a little college town.

Alex kisses me for half the time we sit in total dark. His mouth is soft and warm, our lips overlapping with each other.

The shift out of totality reminds me of a tape being rewound at high speed. The sun peeks out and the light slowly grows, killing the streetlights and cicada song. The birds start to sing again as we swim out of the darkness, back towards the surface. The ripples on the pavement fade out until they completely disappear. Cars start to drive by almost immediately. It's as though the moment has been erased from the tape.

Alex and I sit there for a moment, soaked in sweat and a little too drunk to get up immediately. We've melted into the grass and into the other's side.

"We just witnessed a cosmic event," he says.

"We *participated* in a cosmic event," I correct. I think we might still be participating in a cosmic event, and when I think of all the twists and turns and elaborate detours and how ridiculous it is that Alex and I have ended up drunk on a sidewalk in Nashville for a once in a lifetime experience, I grin and I kiss him again.